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TITLE: Theoretical Domains: A New Heuristic for Teaching Behavioral Theory to HIV/STD Practitioners and Program Developers

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ISSUE: The HIV/STD epidemics have broadened the need for better behavioral intervention programs and highlighted the importance of providing training in behavioral theory to frontline program practitioners. A major challenge to developing trainings to translate behavioral theory to practice is finding an effective way to teach theoretical concepts to people who may not have backgrounds in behavioral science, but are involved in program development and implementation in their HIV prevention programs.

SETTING: HIV/STD Prevention Training Centers

PROJECT: We aimed to develop a method of teaching theory that was simple, clear and avoided excess jargon. Drawing heavily from prominent psychological and public health theory we developed five overarching domains as a way to organize thematically important concepts.

RESULTS: The five domains are: 1) risk perception and appraisal, 2) self-perception and skills, 3) emotion and arousal, 4) relationships and social influence, and 5) environmental and structural factors. Three of the domains (1, 2, and 3) encompass common threads that are consistently viewed as theoretically important in the psychological literature and the other two domains (4 and 5) encompass determinants that have received less attention in the study of health-related behaviors. Together the five domains provide an overview of the major influences on behavior without relying exclusively on any single theory. This approach is intended to provide a heuristic for teaching complex material; it is not intended as an alternate theoretical model.

LESSONS LEARNED: In our experience, this heuristic assists participants in grasping the broad areas related to behavioral theory, facilitates understanding of specific theories, and helps to improve the quality of interventions they currently implement by increasing their understanding of the behavioral determinants that influence risk-taking behaviors.

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